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VITALITY IN STATE HISTORY*

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HISTORY has been defined as "All we know about everything man has ever done, or seen, or thought, or hoped, or felt." There are many definitions still more inclusive, as "History is the sum total of human activity," or, "History in its broadest sense is everything that ever happened." It is the past itself, whatever that is. Accepting for the purposes of this discussion the first and narrower definition, it is clearly an impossibility for any man to acquire knowledge of all history, and the mass of men must be content with far less. What of all the things that man has done, seen, thought, hoped, or felt, have values for the average man? The dramatic? The unusual? The heroic? Or, on the other hand, the normal? The customary? The humdrum conditions of life for the mass of men? What is the test—the acid test—which shall determine what is pure metal and what is mere dross?

As I see it, vitality is the final test to be applied, and by vitality I mean that character in event or movement which makes its determining factor, for good or for evil, in the shaping of the conditions, present and future, of the generation in which one lives, which gives sounder notions of human and social interests, which relates man to the business of living. It is no narrow definition. It covers a multitude of meanings. It may consist, for example, in satisfying the natural human curiosity as to the deeper relationships of the things about us, the facts of our environment, and their connection with the past—"that power which to understand is strength, which to repudiate is weakness." Vital events, vital movements, vital conditions, are the only ones which are worthy of widespread study and assimilation so far as the generality of men are concerned.

Applying this test, it will be found that the dramatic, the unusual, and even the heroic events of the past have far less vital importance than is usually attributed to them, while the normal conditions of life

lie at the heart of all the great movements which have shaped the past and through it the present. And so the man who uses history rightly values events not for their dramatic interest but for the light they cast on the normal conditions which lay back of them and caused them. And knowledge of these conditions is chiefly valuable for the grasp it gives of the ways in which society functions and of their influence upon the present. The aim is not knowledge of the past; knowledge is a mere means towards the end of full living. The end of it all is that, through a more perfect understanding of our environment, we may develop sounder notions of human and social interests and the capacity to "co-operate with the vital principle of betterment," both in enriching our environment and adapting ourselves to its necessities, in order that we may grow. For, here as elsewhere, growth is the moral end. The value of the past lies not in itself but in our todays and tomorrows. Thus those things which touch directly the life of the world of today or of the future and which may bring or retard growth are vital to us.

John Richard Green saw this, and in his "Short History of the English People" said, "If I have said little of the glories of Cressy, it is because I have dwelt much on the wrongs and misery which prompted the verse of Langland and the preaching of Ball . . . I have set Shakespere among the heroes of the Elizabethan age and placed the scientific inquiries of the Royal Society side by side with the victories of the New Model. If some of the conventional figures of military and political history occupy in my pages less than the space usually given them, it is because I have had to find a place for figures little heeded in common history—the figures of the missionary, the poet, the painter, the merchant, or the philosopher."

If these conclusions are true, as I earnestly believe they are, it is clearly apparent that there has been a vast waste of time and energy in the effort to instil historical knowledge into the minds of the mass of men. Anyone who is familiar with history as it is generally written and taught will bear me out in the statement that it has too often emphasized the unusual at the expense of the normal; that it has been long on events and short on movements; that it has, more often than not, lacked any clear distinction between the vital and the meaningless; that it has not given the student the type of training and knowledge which

*The substance of the concluding part of Professor Hamilton's address as President of the State Literary and Historical Association of North Carolina, Raleigh, December 2, 1920. The first part of Professor Hamilton's address dealt briefly with the various views concerning the purpose and value of the study of history. He traced the changing conceptions as to the purpose and value and pointed out that historical knowledge has high values for the purpose of mental cultivation which yields in the problems and situations of life practical returns. In historical knowledge is to be found the solvent of the present and the future. The concluding portion of the address, which appears here, begins with the discussion of the question, "What of the content of history?" (Editor).

he can apply to the problems which he must confront. In short, we have been too often content to attempt to give information and have not sought to stimulate the development of real knowledge capable of practical application to life.

Nowhere have the misconceptions as to the place, function, and value of historical study been more apparent and more striking than in the field of the history of the States of the American Union, and this in spite of the fact that the span of years of the oldest of them has been so short that it is not beyond the power of anyone to acquaint himself with its whole course to the present. Nor are the sources of their history lost and their origins wrapped in doubt and mystery. In the case of every one of them it is the brief story of the development of a people, so simple to be mastered that it is almost true that he who runs may read. It is also a fact easily to be proved, I think, that widespread knowledge of state history among its citizens is not only practicable, but that its possibilities in the way of good results to the commonwealth are boundless.

Take the case of our own commonwealth, North Carolina. If the things which I have indicated constitute the vital in history, must we not revise our past attitude towards the history of the State as we have taught it and chiefly emphasized it? Let us ask ourselves frankly if we have not been inclined to emphasize in that history the things which are, if vital at all, of secondary importance in reaching correct judgments concerning the things which have made us what we are, or concerning the problems of the State today. As a result of the teaching of our history does the average North Carolinian have any background of knowledge and training by which he can analyze existing situations in order to base opinion concerning them and conduct in relation to them upon a sure foundation? Have we not, in a too eager desire for primacy, too frequently selected for emphasis happenings which have had little or no real influence on the later life of our people, which play no part in our life today. Similarly, have we not ignored the conditions, movements, and tendencies which have vitality, which would serve to explain to us why we are what we are, and analysis of which might render us more capable of shaping our destiny for the better? Frankly have we not sought to write and teach the things calculated to develop a sort of purposeless ancestor worship, to breed perfect contentment, a smug satisfaction with what we are and have been, rather than to emphasize the larger and more significant facts calculated to breed dissatisfaction, a divine discontent which might lead us faster along the paths of progress?

For the evidence is overwhelming that our past has not been all glorious, and that its inglorious features rather than their reverse have constituted a large part of the normal conditions which have shaped our present.

We are reminded at every sight of the state flag that we claim certain primacies in the struggle against the mother country in defense of the principle of no taxation without representation. It is a fact far more vital to our present that from 1776 to 1920—nearly a century and a half—we have lived under a self-imposed system of taxation which in iniquity has far surpassed anything that the Crown and Parliament of Great Britain in their most arbitrary and supposedly tyrannical mood ever dreamed of imposing on us.

Again, we emphasize the individualistic tendencies of our people as indicating a love of liberty, but we fail to show that it has manifested itself most notably in our inability to organize effectively for the common good, to develop any widespread civic consciousness and civic responsibility, to see in taxation a method of co-operative support of a co-operative undertaking for the general welfare. Rather we have viewed taxes as an imposition which it was right at any cost of morals to evade, and, as a result, have lived for most of our years, through the denial of opportunity to the majority of our citizens, in a state of servitude. Perhaps you ask, "Liberty-loving North Carolina in *servitude*?" Yes, the servitude which is of all those of the ages the most grinding, depressing, and enduring, the servitude imposed by ignorance, which throughout our history has held us, as a commonwealth, tied and bound in its chains. It has not been confined to the ignorant. Those it has crushed utterly, cutting them off from their God-given heritage of freedom, and denying to them and their children liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and in many cases life itself, all three of which we have solemnly declared in the Declaration of Independence to be inalienable rights of mankind. It has imposed upon the rest—the enlightened—as well, a heavy burden—that of carrying the dead weight of the whole, and of seeing all their ambitions for North Carolina's swift advancement die as the gravity of the load irresistibly held them back on the paths of progress until in many cases hope itself died.

In the same way, we have constantly reminded ourselves and the world that North Carolina was first at Bethel, farthest at Gettysburg and Chickamauga, and last at Appomattox. I yield to none in my deep pride and reverence for these men who so nobly and heroically carried the banners of a lost cause, but I submit in all seriousness that their achievements are not so vital in our history as are the facts that North

Carolina has been at times first in mortality from typhoid fever and homicides, farthest for a long stretch of years in white adult male illiteracy, and at least close to last in recognizing the overwhelming importance of the great social purposes for which modern governments may be said to exist.

We have all heard of late constant boasting of our fine economy in government. It is a far more vital fact that we have spent less for the larger social aims of government than any other State save one, for there lies the explanation of illiteracy, poverty, the steady loss of population that drained our life blood through a large part of our history, the failure to develop the almost fabulous natural resources of the State, the loss of opportunity to millions among whom were doubtless innumerable unhonored and unsung Murpheys, Vances, and Aycocks. We have needed desperately all of these millions, trained and equipped for constructive citizenship, but more desperately still have we felt the lack of the missing leaders. Their loss is irreparable.

Finally, we have heard much within the last few years of the startling figures of our Federal taxes as illustrative of our prosperity. The figures are indeed startling when the vital fact is presented that the Federal taxes paid in the State during the last year amounted to more by twenty-five million dollars than the State has spent in its whole history for the compelling duty of educating its children; and the further fact that the amount paid in the last two years to the United States in taxes is greater than all that has been expended in North Carolina for both public and private education combined since Amadas and Barlowe first saw the green island of Roanoke.

These are characteristic instances—extreme ones, if you will—of the tendency I have indicated, of our failure to apply the test of validity. All of these and many, many more are vital factors in our history. For every one of them touches us closely today, all have had significant effects upon our environment, our opportunity, our character as a people, upon our whole life. The burden of them will rest upon our children do what we will.

Do not misunderstand me. The day will never come, and never ought to come, when we shall fail to recognize and be properly proud of the deeds and lives which are the spot lights of our history. But their brightness must not so dazzle us as to blind us to the existence of the skeletons in our closet. The dead past cannot in such a case bury its own dead; that is our task. Growth and progress demand that we face the fact of their existence, and seek for them burial and, it may be, through our reformation and

expiation, final oblivion. But until we recognize their vitality even in death, history cannot through the training of our citizens pour out upon us its richest bounty.

To those of the past we owe, perchance, a debt which we can never pay; but no payment is demanded other than that of emulation of their virtues and of being warned by their faults; of remedying the wrongs they committed, of rectifying their errors, and of fulfilling the things that they omitted to do. *Our* great debt is to those who are yet to come, and it is in the light of history that we must pay that debt. In behalf of your children and mine, of the generations yet unborn, let us in North Carolina learn the vital things, and so far as in us lies, set about the righting of the wrongs, the undoing of the mistakes, and the doing of all the things that have been left undone in the achievement of liberty and justice.

But the task of emphasizing the vital things is not one merely of the historical specialist or even of the teacher; it is rather the responsibility of all who love North Carolina. The objective of all our historical study of the State must be refixed and restated. In our schools, in our colleges, among our people generally, emphasis must be laid upon the vital, and the past thus linked with the present for the sake of the future.

The end of it all should be to show, not alone wherein North Carolina is first, but rather the reasons for her lagging anywhere, that the means for improvement may be found; to give to her sons and daughters, not only information as to how great she is, but, more vital still, the knowledge of how through their efforts and their lives she may become far greater.

Many of the schools doubtless held mock campaigns and elections among the children before November 2. How many are teaching "Campaign Civics" after the election is over? There are many things, outside the prescribed course of study, which the children should learn, and there never was a better time to teach them than now.

Departing from its policy of not giving aid to state institutions the General Education Board has given the University of North Carolina a sum sufficient to raise the professors' salaries there approximately 25 per cent. The appropriation is for the current year only. The gift was made to relieve the immediate critical situation at the institution, and the aid will be withdrawn after July 1, 1921. All members of the teaching force, from instructors to professors, are included in the temporary increase.